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Mobilization Potential and Democratization Processes of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) in Malaysia: An Interview With Hishamuddin Rais

Ying Hooi Khoo

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In recent years, protests and popular mobilization have become pronounced elements in Malaysian politics. *Bersih* (clean) demonstrations are notably the most outstanding protest events in Malaysian history. Bersih is a group of 89 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) pushing for a thorough reform of the electoral process in Malaysia through rallies and demonstrations. Five opposition parties initiated the idea of Bersih in 2005 and included several NGOs in the 'project' later on. After the first Bersih street protests in November 2007 (Bersih 1.0), the political parties and the NGOs reached the 'compromise pact' that led to the formation of Bersih 2.0 in 2010 as a non-partisan movement free from any political interference. This interview explores the linkages to the broader democratization process in Malaysia from the perspective of Hishamuddin Rais (Isham), a prominent grassroots activist. Isham spent 20 years in political exile after the Baling student protest of 1974. He became active again in 1998 after the ouster of then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the current leader of the opposition coalition. Isham was a member of the Bersih Steering Committee for two years until he stepped down in 2012.

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In den letzten Jahren sind Proteste und öffentliche Mobilisierung zu ausgeprägten Elementen malaysischer Politik geworden. *Bersih* (saubere) Demonstrationen gehören zu den herausragenden Protestereignissen in der malaysischen Geschichte. Bersih ist eine Gruppe von 89 Nichtregierungsorganisationen (NROs), die durch Kundgebungen und Demonstrationen für eine umfassende Reform des Wahlprozesses in Malaysia kämpfen. Fünf Oppositionsparteien initiierten 2005 die Idee von Bersih und integrierten später einige NROs in das „Projekt“. Nach den ersten Bersih-Demonstrationen im November 2007 (Bersih 1.0) einigten sich die politischen Parteien und die NROs auf ein „Kompromissabkommen“, das 2010 zur Gründung von Bersih 2.0 als eine unabhängige Bewegung führte, die frei von politischer Beeinflussung ist. Dieses Interview untersucht die Verbindungen zum breiteren Demokratisierungsprozess in Malaysia aus der Perspektive des bekannten Aktivisten Hishamuddin Rais. Isham verbrachte nach dem großen Baling-Studentenprotest im Jahr 1974 20 Jahre im politischen Exil und ist erst seit dem Sturz im Jahr 1998 des damaligen Vize-Premierministers Anwar Ibrahim, der die aktuelle Oppositionskoalition anführt, wieder politisch aktiv. Bis 2012 war Isham zwei Jahre lang Mitglied des Bersih-Vorstandes.

YING HOOI KHOO: *Thank you for agreeing to my interview,¹ Isham. Could you tell me how you got involved in the Bersih movement?*

HISHAMUDDIN RAIS: At first, the Bersih Steering Committee asked me to help them with some posters, concepts, and the re-launching of the movement. I was not in the *Jawatankuasa Pemandu* (Steering Committee) at that time, merely a ‘contractor’. That was exactly what I did. That was at the very beginning during the re-launching from Bersih 1.0 to Bersih 2.0, where Dr. Dzul² and other opposition politicians officially passed the responsibility of Bersih 1.0 to Ambiga.³ I was there that night at the civic hall and I did stand-up comedy. Every now and then they called me when there was something that I could lend my support to. Finally, the *Jawatankuasa Pemandu* decided to rope me in. So from a ‘contractor’ I became the ‘owner’ of the Bersih 2.0.

KHOO: *Why did you step down in 2012?*

ISHAM: I left Bersih’s *Jawatankuasa Pemandu* three weeks before *Himpunan Kebangkitan Rakyat* KL112.⁴ I left because I did not want it to be seen as a ‘clash’ as I was organizing the Bersih protest at the same time as I was also organizing KL112 at Stadium Merdeka.

KHOO: *What is your take on Bersih having been initially started as a politically motivated movement by oppositional political parties but later being changed into a non-partisan movement? How would you compare them?*

ISHAM: Bersih has gone beyond the limitations of an NGO and become a mass movement. If Bersih were just an organization that sat in a room issuing press statements, Bersih would not be the Bersih of today. I think that Bersih became popular because Bersih opposition challenged (*melawan*) the state and Bersih moved to the streets. The street protests made Bersih a mass movement.

KHOO: *What triggered the emergence of the Bersih movement?*

ISHAM: The elections of 1999.⁵ There has always been talk about the elections being unfair. Personally, I have been writing about the ridiculousness of the election sys-

1 This interview was conducted as part of a dissertation on social movements and democratization in Malaysia at Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, on 30 July 2013. .

2 Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmad was the former Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) Member of Parliament for the Kuala Selangor constituency. He is now the Director of the PAS Research Centre.

3 Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan was the former co-chairperson of Bersih 2.0. Maria Chin Abdullah replaced her in November 2013.

4 This rally was the final show of force from the oppositional *Pakatan Rakyat* (People’s Alliance) before the 13th general elections in 2013. It was dubbed KL112 as the rally was held on 12 January in the city center of Kuala Lumpur.

5 Malaysia’s 10th general election was held on 29 November 1999. The ruling *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) won 148 out of 193 parliamentary seats.

tem since 1999. So that is why after 2004,⁶ politicians felt that there was more to be done. At the very beginning of the formation of Bersih, the demand was mainly to clean up the repeated criticisms over the tainted electoral rolls. But when Bersih 2.0 was launched, eight demands were finally drafted. So instead of just cleaning up the electoral rolls, it now has bigger demands. So I think, as I look at it, a political party is a stakeholder in free and fair elections. Bersih is also a stakeholder but, as a popular movement, cannot be elected. That is the difference: Politicians are stakeholders and want to be elected to parliament. But Bersih is the rank and file, its supporters are stakeholders in general but they do not stand for parliament. So people in general trust Bersih more because it does not wear the politician's hat (*tidak memakai topi politician*).

KHOO: So do you think that the political system was more open in 2004 during former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Badawi's⁷ period? Did you see his premiership as an opportunity?

ISHAM: Yes, there are many factors that come into play. The Abdullah leadership is one of the important factors and also, at the time, the changing of two different types of leadership in the post-Mahathir period. So the post-Mahathir atmosphere was slightly more relaxed. Abdullah Badawi, either by design or by his personality, was not aggressive. This transition period gave breathing space not only to Bersih, but to a lot of NGOs. So from 2004 to 2008, before the 12th general election, there was a kind of 'perestroika'. I have been describing Abdullah Badawi as the 'Gorbachev' of Malaysia. For example, Abdullah Badawi set up the Police Commission.⁸ This created hope and an atmosphere of democratization. People had high hopes for Abdullah Badawi, but he failed to deliver. That performance was reflected in 2008.⁹

KHOO: How would you describe Bersih's relationship and engagement with the Election Commission (EC) at the time?

ISHAM: I think there was no relationship. The EC was disrespectful towards the movement and the EC never treated Bersih seriously. As it is, you can see that none of the eight demands were taken seriously. As a matter of fact, not only the EC, but also the government does not accept the eight demands except for indelible ink (*dakwat kekal*).¹⁰ There have been so many excuses by the EC like their lack of staff (*tak cukup*

6 The 11th Malaysian general election was held on 21 March 2004. Barisan Nasional won 198 parliamentary seats versus the combined opposition parties' 20 seats, with one independent.

7 Abdullah Badawi's premiership lasted from 2003 to 2009.

8 Tun Abdullah Badawi established the Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and Management of the Royal Malaysia Police in 2005. This Royal Commission made 125 recommendations in its 2005 report, which included setting up the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IP-CMC) that was rejected by the police numerous times.

9 The 12th general election was held on 8 March 2008 and is popularly known as the 'political tsunami', in which the Barisan Nasional only won 140 out of 222 parliamentary seats.

10 Many citizens complained that the indelible ink used during the elections could be washed off easily, and indeed, the EC later admitted that the ink used in the 13th general elections on 5 May 2013 was actually food coloring.

kakitangan) or that they have not been able to clean up the electoral rolls and many other excuses. Basically, they are not sincere and not willing to commit themselves, so I personally feel that the EC acts as part of the mechanism to defend the Barisan Nasional, the ruling party.

KHOO: Touching on the question of mobilization, what are, in your opinion, effective tactics to mobilize people in Malaysia?

ISHAM: First, the use of technology. That means using Facebook, blogs, and social media. That is clear. Second, we hold speeches (*ceramah*). I went all over the country from small meetings to large meetings to campaign this way. For two whole months before the Bersih 2.0 rally on 9 July 2011, almost every night there were programs. We went to big towns such as Johor Bahru, Batu Pahat, and Seremban. Then we went to smaller ones, like Felda.¹¹ Third is what we call 'publicity by accident'. It means that whenever our movement is attacked in the media, it gives us free publicity, for example, the 'assault' by *Utusan Malaysia* through inaccurate reporting.¹² In fact, this encourages people to come forward. So there are three tactics, social media, *ceramah*, and 'publicity by accident'.

KHOO: When you refer to ceramah, is it just Bersih itself or do you ride on the influence of politicians?

ISHAM: It depends. Sometimes the functions are just for Bersih, like Bersih Johor Bahru and Bersih Malacca. But sometimes we share (*tumpang*) the political party platform, although I personally always represented Bersih. We also campaign together with NGOs, usually with the *Solidariti Anak Muda Malaysia* (SAMM).¹³ That is specifically for mobilization. But at the same time, we also work closely with political parties, as this is very important. For example, the state of Selangor¹⁴ supports us with banners and buses. Our support mostly comes from the Pakatan Rakyat states. But at the same time, we also reached the understanding that the leadership of the political parties will make statements in support of the Bersih program. So Nik Aziz¹⁵ will make a statement, Anwar¹⁶ will make a statement, Lim Kit Siang¹⁷ will make a

11 Felda stands for Federal Land Development Authority; it is a land settlement agency to carry out projects for the development and settlement of land.

12 *Utusan Malaysia* is a Malay language newspaper in Malaysia. Its credibility has constantly been under criticism due to its bias towards Barisan Nasional in its reporting.

13 SAMM is an NGO, although some of the leaders are from political parties. It is intended to train and develop young Malaysians to build a better country. SAMM is the main organizer of the Occupy Padang Merbok Movement. This movement demanded the resignation of the EC chairman and his committee over the 13th general election results. The occupiers camped at Padang Merbok, near the parliament.

14 The opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat won the state of Selangor from the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional during the 12th general elections in 2008.

15 Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat is the spiritual leader of the PAS.

16 Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is the current leader of opposition and de facto leader of *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR).

17 Lim Kit Siang is a prominent leader of the *Democratic Action Party* (DAP).

statement. These are all concerted efforts. We also work with big NGOs on mobilization, for example, with *Himpunan Hijau*¹⁸ and the *National Felda Settlers' Children Association* (ANAK). These are big organizations that have mass support. If we go for the *ceramah*, we also invite them to come and to show support.

KHOO: Often, NGOs are very careful regarding relationships with politicians or even shy away. What is your take on this?

ISHAM: The thing is that, eventually, Bersih will decide. But let's be honest, in terms of organization and structure, only the political parties have the structure. In the small villages, they are the ones with structures. We have to work with them. So yes, there are some who have reservations, but we are only talking about the program of Bersih.

KHOO: You mentioned earlier, in the context of protest tactics, that the Bersih movement is most often associated with rallies. Do you think protests can actually cause political change?

ISHAM: Yes. When I planned Bersih 3.0 on 28 April 2012, it was with the understanding that elections would be held soon. Finally, the elections were not held. That is why we planned another demonstration, the *Himpunan Kebangkitan Rakyat KL112* in January 2013. Again, the elections were not held. But why do we plan this? I believe a mass protest will translate anger into votes; this is the tactic. Now they want to do a Bersih 4.0! I personally would not do it now because the next elections are four or five years away. So there will be loss of energy. You have to have the protests closer to the elections, so that the protests will translate into votes.

KHOO: Do you see the result of the 13th general elections on 5 May 2013 as a result of the protests?

ISHAM: You must understand that my analysis goes back to 2008. In 2007 and 2008, there were many protests, which culminated in the 2008 general election results. Prior to the election in 2013, we had Bersih 2.0, Bersih 3.0, the KL112, and also *Himpunan Hijau*. Three protests from *Himpunan Hijau*, one in Kuantan, one in Pengerang, and one in Raub. So from 2011 to 2013, there have constantly been protests. The election took place in May 2013; looking at the results, the protests have obviously been translated into votes.

KHOO: Bersih has used social media to reach the people. Do you think the tactic of going on the ground was effective? For example in the rural areas, were people aware of this movement?

ISHAM: Yes. You see, in rural areas, we distributed flyers, and in urban areas, we had flash mobs – so there are different ways and means. But in rural areas actually, in the

18 *Himpunan Hijau* is a Malaysian environmentalist movement protesting a proposed rare-earth processing plant in Kuantan, Pahang. The project is to be set up by the Australian company Lynas.

kampung (village), the political parties are very important because they are the only ones that have the links with these entities. So we have to work with them based on a common understanding of free and fair elections.

KHOO: Do you think that flash mobs are effective?

ISHAM: Flash mobs are effective if the protestors get arrested.

KHOO: What is the relationship of Bersih with the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional?

ISHAM: Since Bersih stands for clean and fair elections in general, we always invite both sides, Pakatan Rakyat and Barisan Nasional. But so far, Barisan Nasional has not responded. They usually do not turn up – there was only one occasion, a debate on electoral reforms¹⁹ between Khairy²⁰ and Ambiga, organized by the *Sinar Harian*.²¹

KHOO: Considering that the Bersih movement has played an important role in the political discourse of the country as well as for democratic developments, how has the Bersih movement influenced the political process in Malaysia?

ISHAM: There are two things. Bersih 2.0 is very important because it was assaulted. There was a crisis in Kuala Lumpur. Certain places were barred. I personally was not allowed to enter Kuala Lumpur.²² And then, there was this *silat* (self-defense) group,²³ the counter-demonstrators. But people still turned up on the street. So the significance of Bersih 2.0 is that people crossed the boundaries of fear. In Malaysia, Bersih 2.0 is the demarcation line. People no longer fear street protests. Street protests are now part of the political discourse. After Bersih 2.0, they became part and parcel of the political process in Malaysia. The same thing also happened with Bersih 3.0. KL112 is an example of how half a million can demonstrate peacefully. So with Bersih 2.0 we crossed fear, and with Bersih 3.0 we proved that we are not scared. With KL112 we proved that we could come to the street peacefully. So that is the gain of the battle.

KHOO: In your view, what are the strengths of the Bersih movement?

ISHAM: I think the strength of the Bersih movement is that people understood that they were cheated. Suddenly, an organization comes out and tells them, okay, let's come together, we don't want to get cheated anymore. So that is why Bersih was

19 The debate entitled "Electoral Reform: Is Enough Being Done?" was held in The Club at Bukit Utama on 25 April 2012. The debates are available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leAKJeN5wF8>.

20 Since 2008, Khairy Jamaluddin has been a Member of Parliament for the Rembau constituency. He is also the chairman of *Barisan Nasional Youth*.

21 Launched in 2006, *Sinar Harian* is a Malay-language daily newspaper and famously known for its relatively balanced reporting.

22 The police obtained a restriction order from the magistrate's court under Section 98 of the Criminal Procedure Code to bar 91 individuals from entering Kuala Lumpur on 9 July 2011.

23 This refers to the Malaysian *Silat Lincah* Organization (PSSLM) which reportedly threatened to 'wage war' against Bersih activists.

popular. Since the 1960s elections, people have known that they were cheated. So now, suddenly an organization said okay, this has turned into a common thing, so now people can come together and show solidarity.

KHOO: Do you think that the leadership is a key factor?

ISHAM: Yes, leadership is a factor. Because Bersih is multi-ethnic, it looks very competent. Ambiga is a lawyer and Pak Samad²⁴ is an icon. Together with other activists, Bersih is kind of a respectable organization, not the 'half past six type'.

KHOO: How about weaknesses?

ISHAM: The weakness is that it is big. It is bulky because it is a coalition. So it is difficult to have a unified opinion, to reach consensus. Let me tell you, for the decision to have the Bersih 2.0 protest, it took four meetings – four enlarged meetings. And there were a lot of arguments. That is the weakness; because everybody has an opinion. Being bulky, however, is also a strength when we look at the macro-level. But when it comes to the details, we have a lot of problems. I mean the strategies, whether we just want to wear yellow or whether we want to paint our house yellow, and all these ideas. It is because not all NGOs are for street protests. Some prefer press conferences and some argue for sending memorandums.

KHOO: So what do you think about this Bersih Tribunal?²⁵

ISHAM: I think it is a very good idea, but it is what I called the last shot. It is just part of what needed to be done. It is the concluding part because the demands during the protests were ignored. I just translated their documents and I personally think that the government will probably ignore it. Whatever the outcomes of the tribunal, you must understand, with the exception of online media, the media would probably not bother to touch such issues. But anywhere else around the world, if they have a tribunal like that, there would probably be debates on television. But no, it does not happen here. It will probably be only selected media that will produce such news.

KHOO: What are the prospects of the Bersih movement in Malaysia?

ISHAM: Well, there are seven more demands that have not been met. Probably we should also add the issues about the gerrymandering and the demarcation because these are the main flaws of our electoral system. The struggle (*perjuangan*) of Bersih should continue and I hope the new leadership will continue what the old leadership started.

24 Datuk A. Samad Said is former co-chairperson of Bersih 2.0 and he is a national laureate.

25 The Bersih People's Tribunal is a tribunal mooted as a response to the public outcry of electoral fraud and irregularities in Malaysia's 13th general election. It took place from 18–22 September 2013. Six renowned individuals – three from overseas and three from Malaysia – are members of the tribunal. The main aim of the tribunal was to investigate irregularities during the 2013 polls.

KHOO: The eight demands introduced by Bersih 2.0 also included democratic elements, e.g., to stop dirty politics. So how is Bersih 2.0 going to implement it, since some of these demands are very subjective?

ISHAM: Exactly. Yes, you are right. There are general concepts such as stopping dirty politics. They are not specific like indelible ink or extending the campaign period (*panjangkan waktu berkempen*). That is the generic; so I think the most important thing is to clean the electoral rolls, extend the campaign period, use indelible ink, and have media freedom. These are four original demands, implementable with the exception of *hentikan rasuah* (stop the corruption). So I think it is best to have a combination of the old demands and the new demands.

KHOO: How do you evaluate the relationship between the social movements, in this case the Bersih movement, with the democratization in Malaysia? Do you think the Bersih movement has managed to open up democratic space?

ISHAM: Yes, I think Bersih plays an important role in creating awareness, particularly among the younger generation. That was proven on 8 May 2013 at Kelana Jaya stadium where young people showed their anger because they felt cheated in the election of 5 May. They came out and protested and you could see the culmination of protest in many places from Ipoh over Kuala Lumpur to Penang. Thousands of people came to the grand finale at Padang Merbok. That shows that the demands for free and fair elections are particularly important among the younger generation. And if you had been there at the night of the Kelana Jaya, you would have noticed that some of them are not even of voting age. So I think if Bersih 4.0 is to come, it would probably be bigger than Bersih 2.0 and Bersih 3.0.

KHOO: My final question: Are you optimistic about the future of the Bersih movement?

ISHAM: Yes, I am. But the Bersih leadership must be clear about tactics and strategies. If the leadership is not clear, then it will fail. If the new leadership of Bersih is clear of what it aims for and how it is going to do it, then it will do all right.

KHOO: Thank you for your time, Isham.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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